

Claims

1. A method for effecting payment for goods or services comprising:
 - providing a centralized payment processor;
 - 5 establishing an intermediary account on the payment processor having a corresponding account identifier;
 - associating the intermediary account with an end-user's account maintained by a vendor;
 - conducting a payment transaction comprising receiving a payment from the
 - 10 end-user at a point-of-sale together with the account identifier;
 - communicating data indicative of the payment transaction from the point-of-sale to the centralized payment processor;
 - in the payment processor, validating the payment transaction data and transmitting a response to the point-of-sale, said response including an indication of
 - 15 approval if the validating step results in approval of the transaction; and
 - in the payment processor, if the validating step results in approval of the transaction, interfacing with the vendor so as to load value into the end-user's associated account responsive to the payment transaction.
2. A method according to claim 1 wherein the payment is in the form of cash.
- 20 3. A method according to claim 1 wherein the payment is made as a debit card transaction.
4. A method according to claim 1 wherein the payment is made as a credit card transaction effected via communication with a computer.
5. A method according to claim 1 wherein the point-of-sale is a brick and
- 25 mortar retail merchant site.
6. A method according to claim 1 wherein the point-of-sale is a vending machine.
7. A method according to claim 1 wherein the point-of-sale is an automated teller machine (ATM).

8. A method according to claim 1 wherein the end-user account is a prepaid long-distance telephone service account.

9. A method according to claim 1 wherein the end-user account is a prepaid wireless telephone service account.

5 10. A method according to claim 1 wherein said communicating data indicative of the payment transaction from the point-of-sale to the central payment processor includes communicating the data from the point-of-sale via a card association network to the payment processor.

10 11. A method according to claim 10 wherein the communicating step includes forwarding the data through an acquiring processor.

12. A method according to claim 10 wherein said communicating data from the point-of-sale to the payment processor comprises communicating an authorization request indicating the amount of the payment.

15 13. A method according to claim 12 further comprising providing a data terminal at the POS for communicating transaction data to the payment processor; the data terminal including means for communicating data over a telephone line.

14. A method according to claim 13 and further comprising printing a receipt at the point-of-sale that indicates the intermediary account number and the payment amount.

20 15. A method according to claim 1 wherein the intermediary account is represented by a physical token that displays the corresponding intermediary account identifier.

16. A method according to claim 15 wherein the token has a machine-readable feature to enable automatic reading of the intermediary account identifier.

25 17. A method according to claim 16 wherein the token comprises a card having a magnetic stripe that stores machine-readable data indicating at least the intermediary account identifier.

18. A method according to claim 17 wherein the card complies with financial industry standard ANSI/ISO 7811.

19. A method according to claim 1 wherein the intermediary account identifier includes a BIN number within a predetermined range so as to identify the account as an intermediary account to support transaction message routing over the financial network.

- 5 20. A method according to claim 1 wherein said communicating data indicative of the transaction from the point-of-sale to the centralized payment processor comprises:

communicating a transaction message indicating the amount of the payment from the point-of-sale to the POS merchant's acquiring processor;

- 10 routing the transaction message from the acquiring processor into a financial network;

providing a network access point for the payment processor; and

routing the transaction message via the network access point to the payment processor.

- 15 21. A method according to claim 20 wherein the financial network is a credit card association network.

22. A method according to claim 1 wherein establishing the intermediary account includes producing a plurality of cards, each card corresponding to a respective intermediary account on the processor.

- 20 23. A method according to claim 22 including printing said cards in accordance with a predetermined design that displays a trademark associated with the customer.

24. A method according to claim 22 including receiving a card order from the customer for a specified number of cards; initializing in the processor a number of
25 new intermediary accounts equal to the number of cards ordered; and assigning unique account identifiers to each of the initialized accounts.

25. A method according to claim 24 wherein said producing the cards includes affixing to each card an indication of the corresponding intermediate account identifier by embossing or by electronic storage.

26. A method according to claim 1 and further comprising collecting an amount of money equal to the payment amount, subject to adjustment, from the point-of-sale merchant's bank account into the intermediary account by electronic funds transfer.

5 27. A method according to claim 26 wherein said collecting step is carried out in a batch mode on a daily basis.

28. A method according to claim 26 wherein said collecting step is effecting via the ACH automated clearing house system.

10 29. A method according to claim 26 and further comprising settling the payment transaction by transferring an amount of money equal to the payment amount, subject to adjustment, from the intermediary account into the vendor's bank account by electronic funds transfer.

15 30. A method according to claim 1 and further comprising providing a customer care interface between the payment processor and the vendor's customer service provider.

31. A method according to claim 30 wherein the customer care interface comprises a world-wide web browser interface.

20 32. A method according to claim 1 wherein validating the payment transaction data includes communicating with the vendor to confirm that the end-user's associated account number is valid.

33. A method according to claim 1 including, in the central processor, maintaining a database of intermediary payment accounts and a list of participating merchants.

25 34. A method according to claim 33 wherein the intermediary payment account database does not include personal identification of the end-user in order to protect the end-user's privacy.

35. A system for effecting electronic payment for goods or services comprising:

a terminal located at a point-of-sale where monetary consideration is received from or on behalf of an end-user to pre-pay for selected goods or services; the terminal operable to exchange electronic messages with a financial network;

5 a financial network operable to exchange electronic messages with the point-of-sale terminal;

a payment processor including a database for storing a list of participating point-of-sale merchants and further including a database associating a plurality of intermediary account numbers with corresponding end-user account numbers; and

10 the payment processor operable to exchange electronic messages with the terminal via the financial network and including means for posting a payment transaction to a corresponding intermediary account in response to receiving a payment message from the point-of-sale terminal, and further including interface means for communicating at least a recharge transaction to a vendor to credit the associated end-user account in response to said posting of a point-of-sale payment transaction.

15 36. A system according to claim 35 wherein the point-of-sale terminal comprises an automated teller machine (ATM).

37. A system according to claim 35 wherein the point-of-sale terminal comprises a vending machine.

20 38. A system according to claim 35 wherein the financial network comprises a card association network.

39. A system according to claim 35 and further comprising an acquiring processor for communicating messages between the financial network and a plurality of such terminals.

25 40. A method for effecting payment for telephone services comprising: establishing an intermediary account having a corresponding account identifier;

associating the intermediary account with an end-user's prepaid account maintained by a telecommunications vendor;

conducting a transaction comprising receiving a payment from the end-user at a point-of-sale together with the account identifier for loading value into the end-user's prepaid account;

electronically communicating data indicative of the transaction from the point-of-sale to a central payment processor;

in the central payment processor, validating the transaction data and transmitting a response to the point-of-sale; and

in the central processor, if the validating step results in approval of the transaction, sending a message to the telecommunications vendor for loading value into the end-user's associated prepaid account responsive to the payment transaction.

41. A method according to claim 40 wherein said communicating step comprises direct communication between the point-of-sale and the central payment processor.

42. A method according to claim 40 wherein said communicating step comprises communication between the point-of-sale and the central payment processor via a merchant hub.

43. A method according to claim 40 and further comprising collecting an amount of money equal to the payment amount, subject to adjustment, from the point-of-sale merchant's bank account into the intermediary account by electronic funds transfer.

44. A method according to claim 43 wherein said collecting step is carried out in a batch mode on a daily basis.

45. A method according to claim 43 wherein said collecting step is effecting via the ACH.

46. A method according to claim 43 wherein the telecommunications vendor is a prepaid platform operator.

47. A method according to claim 43 and further comprising settling the transaction by transferring an amount of money equal to the payment amount, subject to adjustment, from the intermediary account into the telecommunications vendor's bank account by electronic funds transfer.

48. A method for effecting payment for goods or services comprising:
 providing a centralized payment processor;
 establishing an intermediary account on the payment processor having a
 corresponding account identifier;

5 conducting a payment transaction comprising receiving a payment from the
 end-user at a point-of-sale together with the account identifier;

 communicating data indicative of the payment transaction from the point-of-
 sale to the centralized payment processor via a financial network;

 in the payment processor, validating the payment transaction data and
 10 transmitting a response to the point-of-sale, said response including an indication of
 approval if the validating step results in approval of the transaction; and

 in the payment processor, if the validating step results in approval of the
 transaction, posting a credit to the corresponding intermediary account in response to
 the payment transaction.

15 49. A method according to claim 48 and further comprising issuing a card to
 the end-user that includes identification of the end-user's intermediary account.